UDK 316.77(497.6)
Pregledni naučni rad

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MEDIA DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION IN POST-WAR BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Abstract

The first post-war interventions in the reconstruction of the media sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina took place in the early years following the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement. These interventions were implemented through the regulations of the Office of the High Representative and the establishment of the public broadcasting system. However, years later, public broadcasters came to reflect the fragmentation of society rather than the original idea of coordinated operation.

This study examines the influence of socio-political fragmentation on the functioning and development of the media in the post-war period, with a specific focus on the role of public service broadcasters and the process of media digitalisation. A qualitative analysis was conducted, drawing on academic research, media studies, official documents such as laws, court rulings, and institutional reports, as well as relevant media coverage.

The findings indicate that political and administrative fragmentation continues to obstruct media reform and development. This is evident in the slow progress of digitalisation, the inconsistent implementation of media legislation, and the long-term financial instability of public broadcasters.

Keywords**:** *fragmented society, post-war media, media development, media digitalization, public service broadcasting*

RAZVOJ MEDIJA I POLITIČKA FRAGMENTACIJA U POSLIJERATNOJ BOSNI I HERCEGOVINI

Sažetak

Medijski sistemi u postkonfliktnim društvima često odražavaju složene odnose između politike, identiteta i društvene tranzicije. Bosna i Hercegovina predstavlja izrazit primjer takvog okruženja, gdje procesi demokratizacije i medijskog razvoja traju paralelno s dubokim društvenim i političkim podjelama. U takvom kontekstu, mediji imaju ključnu ulogu u oblikovanju javnog diskursa i podršci demokratskim procesima, ali su istovremeno izloženi pritiscima koji proizlaze iz fragmentirane političke strukture.

Analiza medijskog sistema u Bosni i Hercegovini pokazuje da su politička decentralizacija i fragmentacija, nastale nakon rata 1992–1995. i potpisivanja Dejtonskog mirovnog sporazuma, presudno oblikovale način na koji mediji u zemlji funkcionišu. Poslijeratna državna struktura, koja obuhvata dva entiteta, Distrikt Brčko i deset kantona unutar Federacije BiH, stvorila je složen političko-administrativni okvir koji utiče na rad javnih i privatnih medija.

Proces digitalizacije televizijskog emitovanja dodatno ilustrira spor i neujednačen napredak medijskih politika, jer politička neslaganja i administrativna rascjepkanost kontinuirano usporavaju digitalnu transformaciju.

Kvalitativna analiza, zasnovana na akademskim istraživanjima, institucionalnim dokumentima i relevantnim medijskim sadržajima, pokazuje da politička i etnička fragmentacija ima uticaj na više segmenata medijskog sistema: održivost javnih servisa, sprovođenje medijskih zakona, integraciju sistema javnog emitovanja te razvoj digitalizacije i modernizacije sektora.

Zaključno, medijski sistem Bosne i Hercegovine odražava poslijeratnu društvenu i političku fragmentaciju. Njegovo unapređenje zahtijeva jačanje saradnje javnih emitera, zaštitu uređivačke nezavisnosti, uz uvažavanje složenosti političko-administrativnog okvira zemlje.

Ključne riječi: *fragmentirano društvo, poslijeratni mediji, razvoj medija, digitalizacija, javni servis*

1. Introduction

The current media landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects the deep political decentralisation that emerged at the end of the 20th century, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, as well as the consequences of war aggression and armed conflict that occurred from 1992 to 1995. For better understanding the functioning of the media system in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is essential to recognise that not only the Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) operate within the framework of the General Framework Agreement for Peace (Dayton Peace Agreement in further text), commonly known as the Dayton Agreement, but that the private media sector is also indirectly shaped by the political and territorial divisions introduced by it. The Dayton Agreement created a highly decentralised and complex political-administrative structure, making Bosnia and Herzegovina one of the most multi-layered governance systems in the world, establishing a framework intended to ensure peace and political balance. However, Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged as a nominally democratic state composed of two, often conflicting administrative entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska - and the Brčko District as a self-governing administrative unit under the sovereignty of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, the Federation itself is subdivided into ten cantons, each with its own government and institutions, further complicating the country's administrative as well as media governance landscape.

The decentralised political reality is also reflected in the functioning of the media, particularly of Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs): one at the state level (BHRT) and two at the entity level (RTVFBiH and RTRS). These broadcasters were established after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, through the decrees and authorities of the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina[1].

The subject of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the media sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the post-war period, focusing on the reflection of the political-administrative structure of the state on media development, as well as the impact of political fragmentation on the sustainability and functioning of public broadcasters. The paper also analyses the development of the digitalisation process, as well as the issue of establishing and improving professional ethical standards in the media sector.

Regarding the socio-political context of media, there is an important impact of political parties divided along ethno-national lines. Political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina act as self-proclaimed elites, each positioning itself as the guardian of its respective group's national interests and security. In line with this, wartime rhetoric is frequently used, reviving divisions and cultivating fear among the population. The symbolic power of the media allows us to explain the distinctive role of the media in the reproduction of ideologies. Hence, public discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina is often reduced to binary oppositions - "us" versus "them" - where "they" are portrayed as threats to human rights, property, and identity, while at the same time "we" are framed as defenders of justice, freedom, and, above all, national identity and ideology. Such polarisation sustains political control and obstructs the development of a

[1] Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2001. *Decision establishing the Communications Regulatory Agency* ("Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina", No. 8/01; Official Gazette of the Federation of BiH, No. 11/01; Official Gazette of the Republika Srpska, No. 12/01).

pluralistic civic environment, including within the media sphere. It also contributes to the portrayal of "us" and "them" as opposing sides in the creation of media discourses.[2]

This socio-political context reflects a situation in which the media are not objective, and their politically oriented function is biasedly transformed into a form of propaganda aimed at affirming certain ideological and culturological matrices on which the governance of political elites, marked by an ethnonational character, is based.[3]

The paper examines the socio-political characteristics of the post-war media landscape, claiming that just as Bosnia and Herzegovina remains territorially and ethnically divided, both public and private media largely follow the same pattern.

Literature review

Communication research on the post-war development of the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina addresses important topics such as media policies and the transformation of the media system, the role of the media in the reconstruction of society, ethnic and national narratives, communication practices, and legal regulations.

Regarding the media legislation, for a better understanding of the media legal framework, there is a significant study conducted by the BH Journalists Association, examining the legal framework governing the media until 2021[4]. The study provides an important insight into the legal regulation of the media sector by analyzing laws and practices in seven thematic areas, with recommendations for improvement. In the context of this study, the aforementioned research is useful as a source of information on the strengths and weaknesses of media legislation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Understanding legal regulation is important for further analysing the stagnation or development of the media sector. Another interesting study is from 2021, "*Integration challenges of media policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina",*[5] which analyses the post-war integration of EU regulations in the media sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The paper argues that establishing a unified media policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the establishment of the PSB are among the key issues facing state institutions. The paper is a useful source that provides an overview of the application of EU regulations, as it primarily focuses on the content analysis of the European Commission's annual reports on the progress of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the process of implementing reforms of the media policy sector. However, the aforementioned papers do not offer an analytical overview of the development of individual areas such as digitalisation, the impact of political fragmentation on the sustainability and functioning of public broadcasters, which are important elements in understanding the post-war challenges of the media sector in BiH, and which our study seeks to complement.

The future of PSS is frequently discussed in public space but also in academic and research papers. Among others, an important research regarding the development of PSBs is *"The*

[2] Van Dijk, T. A., 1989. "Mediating racism: The role of the media in the reproduction of racism". U: R. Wodak, ur. *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse*, str. 199-226. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
[3] Kukić, D., 2017. "Media and (De)Mythologization." *Preliminary Communication*, 6 (10), pp. 1503–1518. Available at: https://www.scribd.com/document/809981011/D-Kukic-Mediji-i-de-mitologizacija [accessed 30 October 2025].
[4] Hrnjić Kuduzović, Z., 2021. *Zajedno ka boljim medijskim zakonima: analiza medijskog zakonodavstva u Bosni i Hercegovini sa preporukama za unapređenje*. Sarajevo: Udruženje BH novinari.

[5] Mehmedović, M., 2021. *Integration Challenges of Media Policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Applied Media Studies Journal 2, no. 2, 78–86.

Future of Public Service Broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina"[6] which captures Bosnia and Herzegovina PSBs from its first establishment, further development and facing obstacles. The paper argues that the PSB in Bosnia and Herzegovina is in a deep crisis, and that the BHRT, as a state PSB, will be forced to shut down due to the lack of dialogue and financial resources necessary for quality work. The paper follows the development and crises of the PSB until the severe crisis of BHRT in 2016. Our paper reveals the accuracy of its predictions, providing information about further financial and other crises regarding the functioning of BHRT from 2015 to 2025, and as such, can be considered a sort of supplement to the aforementioned research.

An important source of information can be found in international analysis and reports that address issues of media development, freedom of speech, transparency of ownership, but also the socio-political context of media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as changes in legal frameworks and norms[7]. Unlike international reports that are generally conducted annually, our research brings a time-lined overview of issues and changes regarding the PBS, digitalisation, and also an insight into the socio-political context of media development.

Additionally, books and papers in the fields of socio-political, cultural, and media studies were used in the preparation of this study. Some examples are Bajomi-Lázár, Hrvatin, and Thompson, "Comparing Post-Socialist Media Systems: The Case of Southeast Europe", and Mujkić; "We, the Citizens of Ethnopolis".

The post-socialist development of the media sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains an important topic for further research, particularly in the context of the evolution and functioning of the public broadcasting system. Most studies on the Bosnian media landscape rely on the work of domestic scholars, whose analyses offer valuable local insights. This study aims to contribute to current research by providing an overview of the development of key issues within the media landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the evolution of public broadcasters and the political and administrative context of the media.

Research questions and research aim

Building on the above mentioned and other research, this study analyses the influence of socio-political fragmentation on the post-war development of the media system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a focus on the reflection of socio-political fragmentation on the media sector, the PSBs' development and sustainability, the long-term delayed digitalization process, and the development and regulation of print and online media in the country.

The study tends to contribute to existing research in the field of media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly by researching the period from 2015 to 2025. Considering that the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina during this period experienced several important moments - such as the financial crisis of public broadcasters, the introduction of defamation criminalization law in one of the entities, the issuance of court rulings addressing the long-standing issue of RTV license fee collection, and the finalization of the digitalization project - it is crucial to investigate and elaborate on how these developments have shaped the maintaining, independence, and sustainability of media sector in the country.

[6] Ahmetašević, N., Hadžiristić, T., 2017. The Future of Public Service Broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo: Analitika

[7] For more details view reports from: https://rsf.org/en and https://www.irex.org/

Therefore, the specific aim of this study is to analyze the development and state of the media in the post-war period, with a particular focus on the the PSBs development and sustainability, as well as the long-term delayed digitalization process, and the development and regulation of print and online media in the country, but also to connect these factors with the political and ethnical fragmentation of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society.

The research questions this study seeks to answer are as follows:

1. How does the political-administrative structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina shape the development and functioning of the media system?
2. How does political fragmentation affect the sustainability and operation of public service broadcasters?
3. What does the delayed digitalisation process in Bosnia and Herzegovina indicate about the relationship between media policy and political structures?

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative research approach, following Flick's approach[8], which focuses on understanding social phenomena in their specific socio-political context. Flick's approach recommends the use of qualitative text analysis as a valuable source of information, drawing on theoretical and empirical literature to contextualise, compare, and generalise research findings. Emphasising the importance of basing research on the understanding of social relations, Flick explains that the text, as the subject of analysis, is created on the basis of the collected data and that it represents a kind of substitute for reality in the further research process, which justifies the use of this method in this particular research. Triangulation as a strategy for improving the quality of qualitative research is applied throughout, including different sorts of data in the study results. This implies the analysis of existing textual sources such as scientific research, media reports, court decisions, etc. Bosnia and Herzegovina is treated as a single case of a post-conflict, multi-ethnic, and politically fragmented society, where the media system reflects wider social and political divisions.

The study used both primary and secondary sources. These include official documents such as laws, strategies, annual reports, and court decisions; reports from domestic and international organizations (e.g., OSCE, EBU, BH Novinari); academic publications on media development and post-socialist democratic transitions; and media content from major outlets such as BHT, FTV, RTRS, and Al Jazeera Balkans.[9]

The collected materials were analysed using qualitative content analysis with thematic coding, following Flick's instructions on identifying recurring themes and patterns across different sources. The analysis focused on political and administrative influence on media governance, the legal and institutional setup of public broadcasters, their financial sustainability and independence, and how political fragmentation shapes media narratives ("us" versus "them").

3. Results

Despite a well-constructed legal framework that foresaw potential disagreements between broadcasters and, given the specific socio-political conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

[8] Flick, U., 2018. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (6th ed.). London/Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

[9]The specific documents used for this study are mentioned in the Results section. The criterion for selecting documents for analysis was the relevance of the document to theorganisations topic being addressed.

prescribed the establishment of the Corporation, the PSB system in Bosnia and Herzegovina has not been able to function as a single organisation upholding objectivity and impartiality as the fundamental principles of journalism. Instead of serving as advocates of peace and reconciliation in a country devastated by aggression and war, PSB channels have acted as spokespersons for ethnic leaders. Moreover, it can be said that the PSB system does not operate in accordance with the legal framework that was supposed to regulate it.

Therefore, the answer to our first research question, which examines the political-administrative structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina in relation to the development and functioning of the media system, reveals notable contradictions. Based on the qualitative analysis of available literature, foreign and domestic research, and legislative media frameworks, we can see that media laws are theoretically aligned to the country's political-administrative structure (for example, the provision for establishing the Public Broadcasters' Corporation). However, in practice, the socio-political realities of the state are making difficult to implement even well-designed regulations. Consequently, the fragmented society significantly slows the application of laws and the growth and development of the media sector. In practice, this is most prominently reflected in the large number of media outlets, failing to represent the pluralism of society.

The broadcasting market in Bosnia and Herzegovina is overloaded. According to information from the end of 2024, 116 television stations and 153 radio stations in Bosnia and Herzegovina have Licenses for Television/Radio Broadcasting.[10] Out of this number, there are 21 television and 64 radio public broadcasters (not including PSB channels) established in some of the 10 cantons or 143 municipalities. There are also 12 holders of Consents for the provision of on-demand audiovisual media services, of which three are publicly owned, and nine are privately owned.[11] Among the ten cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, four have established radio or television outlets owned by cantonal governments (TVSA, RTVTK, RTVUSK, RTVBPK), while in the remaining six cantons, there are media outlets that are financially supported or owned by municipal or city governments. The Zenica-Doboj Canton has also initiated the establishment of its own cantonal broadcaster[12], reviving an earlier initiative. Licensees for broadcasting are provided by the Communication Regulatory Agency (CRA) for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was established by the HR in 2001. According to the Law on Public Radio-Television System of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the CRA, in coordination with the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regulates the radiofrequency spectrum, regarding the international conventions.[13] The CRA is a state agency with the responsibility to supervise broadcasting services, issue licenses, coordinate the PSB system, and allocate the radio-frequency spectrum.

When discussing the fragmentation of society and the oversaturation of the media space, this is certainly reflected in the state of print and online media as well. Bosnia's print and online media market is also oversaturated. At the end of 2025, there were 8 daily newspapers, 7 press agencies, and almost 200 print periodicals[14]. According to the analysis of the Press and Online

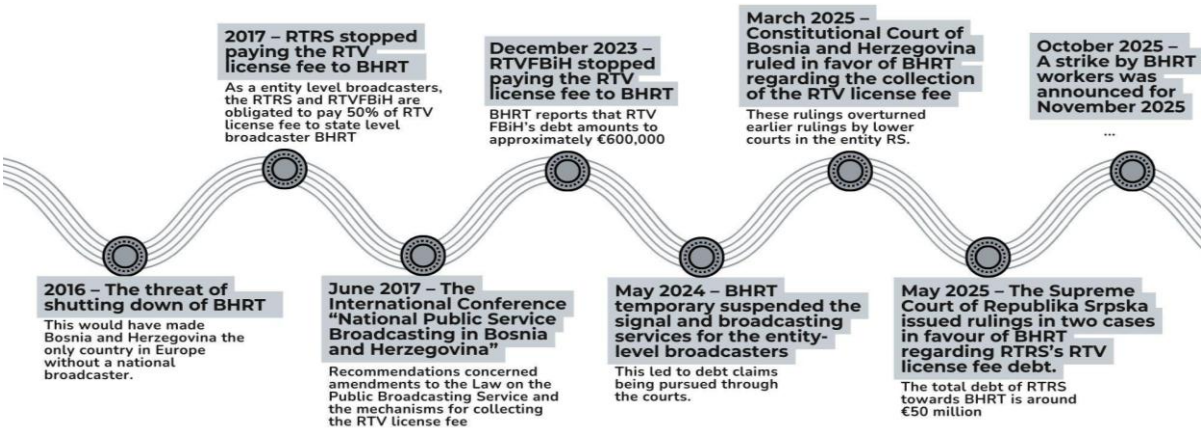
[10] Regulatory Agency for Communications, 2025. *Annual Report of the Regulatory Agency for Communications for 2024. No: 01-02-3-342-1/25. March 2025*, p. 22. Sarajevo: Regulatory Agency for Communications.
[11] Ibid. p. 21
[12] Federalna.ba, 2025. „Vlada ZDK usvojila odluku o osnivanju JP Televizija ZDK". *Federalna.ba*, 20. 6. 2025. Available at: https://www.federalna.ba/vlada-zdk-usvojila-odluku-o-osnivanju-jp-televizija-zdk-t0rxb [30. 10. 2025].
[13] Alić, S., 2019. Reporting of Western Balkan press on the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey through the samples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia. Master's thesis, Istanbul: Marmara University. p. 41
[14] *Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, available at:: https://vzs.ba (28. 10. 2025.)

media Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are 488 news websites in Bosnia and Herzegovina[15]. The regulation of print and online media in Bosnia and Herzegovina is managed by the Press Council (PC), a non-governmental and non-profit organisation established in 2006. The Press and Online Media Council is a self-regulatory body for print and online media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, working at the state level for both entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska.

With the initiative of media organisations and journalists, Bosnia and Herzegovina has become the first post-Yugoslav country with an established print media regulatory body.[16] The mandate of the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina was extended to online media in 2011.

Unfortunately, a large number of media services in a limited media market is usually seen as suggestive of political and other conflicting affiliations rather than media pluralism[17].

The answer to our second research question, how does the political fragmentation affect the sustainability and operation of public service broadcasters, lies in analysing the crisis that public service broadcasters in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been facing, especially over the last decade. Timeline 1 represents a short overview of important developments for PSBs in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the period 2015-2025.



Timeline 1. Overview of important developments for PSBs in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the period 2015-2025

Due to the specifics of the Constitution, but moreover because of the tension of internal relations[18], the European Union had to establish a special supervisor for Bosnia and Herzegovina and named it the Office of High Representative (OHR). The OHR is an international institution responsible for supervising the implementation of the civil aspects of the Dayton Agreement. The function of the High Representative (HR) is determined by the Dayton Agreement. "High Representative represents the ultimate authority in terms of the Agreements' interpretation. High Representative is authorised to pass laws, if considered

[15] Ibid. (20.11.2025)

[16] Alić, S. (2019) *Reporting of Western Balkan press on the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey*. Master's thesis, Marmara University, Istanbul. p. 43

[17] Hodžić, S. 2014. *"Media Integrity Matters, Reclaiming the public service values in media and journalism*", Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies, Ljubljana, Slovenia, pp. 129,130

[18] For instance, the governance of Switzerland is also multilayered; however, it manages to maintain internal peace and continue developing in areas such as the economy, media, social policy, and so on. This shows that a multilayered state administration does not necessarily imply instability and stagnation, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the challenges are mainly related to socio-political issues.

necessary, remove officials that obstruct activities from their posts and coordinate activities with other international organisations."[19] Among other decisions imposed by HR, Media Restructuring Decisions are surely among the most important ones. Hence, in 2002, OHR formally established the Public Service Broadcasting system in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was an official condition for signing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European Union.[20] Since it was established, PSB has been ruled by political elites who are completely sabotaging normal functioning and development, under the excuse of vital national interest defence. Regarding the situation from the last decade, in 2016, as a result of political and financial instability, the main public broadcaster BHRT was on the verge of being shut down, which would have made Bosnia and Herzegovina the only country in Europe without a national broadcaster. These recurring shutdown threats and financial crises clearly indicate a lack of sustainability within the PSB system. The BHRT mainly relies on funds from the TV license fee collected through taxation, but it also has an income from advertising and equipment rental. The Law of Communication prescribes that 50% of advertising tax and license fee income will belong to BHRT, while each of the entity broadcasters, RTV FBiH and RTRS, will get 25%.[21] The main purpose of such a solution was to provide financial stability for the country-wide BHRT, but also to create a strong mechanism for the integration of the three broadcasters into a unified PSB system.[22] Media organisations and journalists have actualised this matter and state broadcaster BHRT remain to operate. As a result, in June 2017, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), in coordination with BHRT, media organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Ministry of Transport and Communication, organised the International Conference "National Public Service Broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina". The key recommendations of this conference focused on supporting and strengthening the public broadcaster in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the aim of ensuring its financial sustainability, independence, and professionalism. Some of the more significant recommendations also concern amendments to the Law on the Public Broadcasting Service and the mechanisms for collecting the RTV license fee.[23] However, there was not much done over the years. BHRT is still facing financial difficulties. Another crisis moment for the public broadcasting system occurred in May 2024, when BHRT, as the state-level public broadcaster, temporarily suspended the signal and broadcasting services for the entity-level broadcaster.[24] In its explanation, BHRT stated that the reason for this action was the large amount of debt that had significantly increased for RTRS since 2017 and for RTV FBiH since December 2023.[25] Namely, following the dysfunctional pattern of ignoring state

[19] Office of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2001. *Decision establishing the Communications Regulatory Agency* ("Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina", No. 8/01; Official Gazette of the Federation of BiH, No. 11/01; Official Gazette of the Republika Srpska, No. 12/01).

[20] Jusić, T. & Ahmetašević, N., 2013. *RRPP BiH – Media Assistance*, p. 40 [online]. Sarajevo: Analitika – Center for Social Research. Available at: https://analitika.ba/sites/default/files/publikacije/jusic_and_ahmetasevic_-_rrpp_bih_medassistance_31dec2013_final.pdf [accessed 30 October 2025].

[21] Law on the Public Broadcasting System of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Zakon o javnom radiotelevizijskom sistemu Bosne i Hercegovine), 2005. „Article 23". *Official Gazette of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, No. 78/05.

[22] Ahmetašević, N. & Hadžiristić, T., 2017. *The Future of Public Service Broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Sarajevo: Analitika – Center for Social Research, p. 31.

[23] Council of Europe, 2019. *Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the development of the Ombudsman institution*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

[24] Al Jazeera Balkans, 2024. "Problem javnih emitera u BiH kulminirao gašenjem signala FTV". *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 8 May. Available at: https://balkans.aljazeera.net/teme/2024/5/8/problem-javnih-emitera-u-bih-kulminirao-gasenjem-signala-federalne-rtv [30 Oct 2025];

[25] The court ruled that the signal shutdown was not legally justified, and BHRT restored the signal to the entity broadcasters. This action by BHRT is interpreted as an attempt to draw attention to the long-standing problem it faces, as BHRT itself emphasized that the signal shutdown was temporary. Federalna.ba, 2024. "Sud odlučio: BHRT je bez zakonskog uporišta ugasio signal FTV-a". *Federalna.ba*, 8 May. Available at:

laws, the public broadcaster located in the smaller entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina - RTRS - has continuously failed to transfer the RTV license fee to the state-level public broadcaster, BHRT. The slow, or even nonexistent, establishment of the Public Broadcasting Services Corporation, combined with RTRS's neglect of its legal obligations, has resulted in approximately €50 million in debt owed by RTRS to BHRT,[26] placing the state-level broadcaster in a very difficult financial situation and making it impossible to operate effectively. In March 2025, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina ruled in favour of BHRT regarding the collection of the RTV license fee[27] and instructed the Supreme Court of the Republika Srpska to act on the matter within three months. In May 2025, the Supreme Court of Republika Srpska issued rulings in two cases in favour of BHRT regarding RTRS's RTV license fee debt.[28] These court decisions do not mark the end of BHRT's struggle to secure its right to the RTV license fee, but they are a positive sign on the path toward achieving that right. On the other hand, RTV FBiH's debt to BHRT has been increasing since 2023, and it refers not only to untransferred RTV license fee collections but also to debts related to the use of programs and equipment. BHRT reports that RTV FBiH's debt amounts to approximately €600,000.[29]

Although state structures allocate approximately 30 million BAM annually[30] for the operation of public broadcasters, when this amount is distributed among 84 public media outlets, it is insufficient for sustainable and higher-quality functioning of the media sector. In response to the crises affecting public broadcasters and to address the issue of their financing, the Ministry of Communications and Transport of Bosnia and Herzegovina established a working group in 2023, tasked with drafting a new Public RTV System Law. Aligning this law, as well as other pending legislation on the operation of electronic media, with EU standards is the only path for Bosnia and Herzegovina toward EU integration.

The answer to our third research question, which explores the relationship between media policy and political structures in the context of the delayed digitalisation process, lies in the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina remains one of the least developed countries in Europe in this field. Timeline 2 represents a short overview of important developments in the digitalisation process in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the period 2006-2025.

https://www.federalna.ba/sud-odlucio-bhrt-je-bez-zakonskog-uporista-ugasio-signal-ftv-a-prra4 [accessed 30 October 2025].

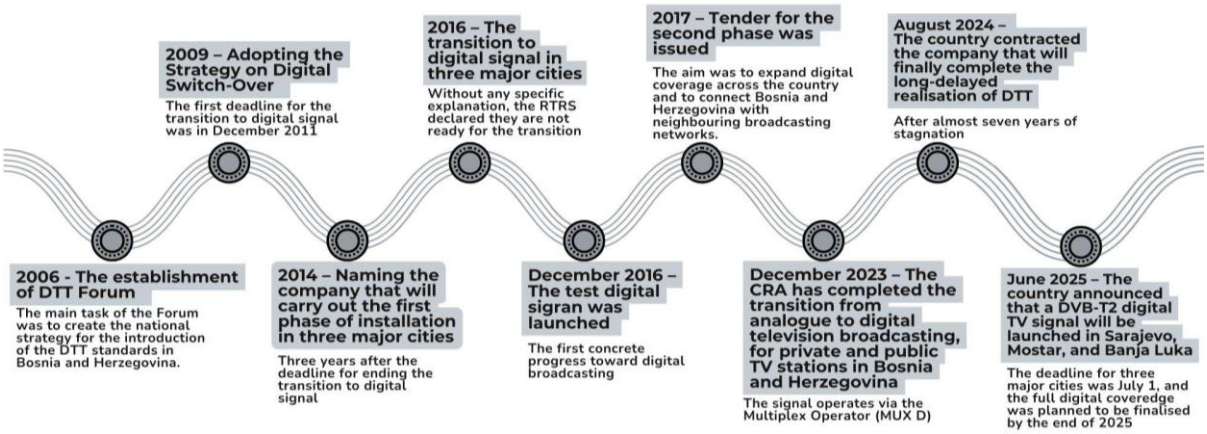
[26]Radio Sarajevo, 2025. "Iz BHRT-a kažu da su pred gašenjem: RTRS nam duguje 95 miliona KM, pitanje dana kad ćemo se ugasiti". *RadioSarajevo.ba*, 18 June. Available at: https://radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/iz-bhrt-a-kazu-da-su-pred-gasenjem-rtrs-nam-duguje-95-miliona-km-pitanje-dana-kad-cemo-se-ugasiti/594041 [30 October 2025].

[27]Radio-televizija Bosne i Hercegovine, 2025. „Sud potvrdio pravo BHRT-a na dio RTV takse: RTRS dužan prenijeti sredstva". *BHRT.ba*, 1.8.2025.. Dostupno na: https://www.bhrt.ba/sud-potvrdio-pravo-bhrt-a-na-dio-rtv-takse-rtrs-du%C5%BEan-prenijeti-sredstva [30 October 2025].

[28] BHRT, 2025. "Vrhovni sud RS odlučio u korist BHRT-a: RTRS godinama bez osnova uskraćivao sredstva". *BHRT.ba*, 1 August 2025. Dostupno na: https://bhrt.ba/vrhovni-sud-rs-odlu%C4%8Dio-u-korist-bhrt-a-rtrs-godinama-bez-osnova-uskra%C4%87ivao-sredstva [30 October 2025].

[29] Klix.ba, 2025. "BHRT upozorava da bi uskoro moglo doći do gašenja ove televizije, ali i FTV-a: Pitanje je dana". *Klix.ba*, 18 June 2025. Dostupno na: https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/bhrt-upozorava-da-bi-uskoro-moglo-doci-do-gasenja-ove-televizije-ali-i-ftv-a-pitanje-dana/250618138 [30 October 2025].

[30] Hodžić, S. i Sokol, A., ur., 2018. *Javni lokalni mediji: između javnog interesa i finansijske ovisnosti*. Sarajevo: Mediacentar Sarajevo. p. 17



Timeline 2. Overview of important developments in the digitalisation process in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the period 2006-2025

Although the first reference to digitalisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina dates back to 2006, with the establishment of the Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) Forum as an expert body for digital transmission, citizens are still witnessing the final stages of the process almost twenty years later. The European Commission had already recognised the advantages of switching from analogue to digital broadcasting in 2003 and provided general guidelines for the implementation of this transition, yet Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress has been slowed by political disagreements and institutional fragmentation.[31] The main task of the mentioned Forum in 2006 was to create the national strategy for the introduction of the DTT standards in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Strategy on Digital Switch-Over was adopted in 2009, and the first deadline for transition to digital signal was in December 2011. However, due to the complicated socio-political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, continued administrative delays, as well as several failed public tenders for the procurement of technical equipment, the Strategy implementation was slow and sporadic. The company that will carry out the first phase of installation in three major cities - Sarajevo, Banja Luka, and Mostar was named in 2014., and this phase was completed in 2016, marking the first concrete progress toward digital broadcasting. Shortly after the Ministry of Transport and Communication announced the signal launch, the RTRS declared, without providing the details, that they are not ready to launch their signal at the same time as Sarajevo and Mostar.[32] This situation reflected the persistent lack of coordination among public service broadcasters in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, a test digital signal was launched at the end of 2016. In 2017, a new tender for the second phase was issued. The aim was to expand digital coverage across the country and to connect Bosnia and Herzegovina with neighbouring broadcasting networks.[33] After years of stagnation, in August 2024, the country contracted the company that will finally complete the long-delayed realisation of DTT. Finally, in June 2025, the country announced that a DVB-T2 digital TV signal will be launched in Sarajevo, Mostar, and Banja Luka by 1 July, marking a significant

[31] DTT Forum, 2009. *Strategy on the Switch-Over from Analogue to Digital Terrestrial Broadcasting in the Frequency Bands of 174-230 MHz and 470-862 MHz in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, p. 13. Sarajevo: DTT Forum.
[32] Klix.ba, 2016. "Na zahtjev RTRS-a prolongirano puštanje testnog digitalnog signala". *Klix.ba*, 28 September 2016. Available at: https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/na-zahtjev-rtrs-a-prolongirano-pustanje-testnog-digitalnog-signala/160928055 [accessed 30 October 2025].
[33] Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić, 2017

step toward full digital coverage by the end of the year. However, the implementation is once again slow and already delayed for some regions in the country.[34]

4. Discussion/conclusion

The analysis of the media system in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that political decentralisation and ethno-political fragmentation, which emerged after the 1992–1995 war and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, strongly shape the way the media in the country functions. The post-war structure of the state, with two entities, the Brčko District and ten cantons within the Federation of BiH, has created a complex political-administrative system that directly affects public and private media. This multi-layered structure, although formally designed to ensure peace and political balance, in practice prevents the stable and efficient functioning of the media system, especially public services.

Public services (BHRT, RTVFBiH and RTRS) operate within the framework of political pressures and ethno-national interests, which leads to constant financial crises and limits their editorial independence. Instead of acting as instruments of reconciliation and public interest, these media often reproduce the ideological matrix of the political elite and encourage the polarisation of public discourse through the narrative of "us" versus "them". Fragmented social reality leads to slower implementation of media laws and hinders the development of a pluralistic media environment.

The process of digitalisation of television broadcasting also illustrates the slow and difficult implementation of media policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Political disagreements, administrative fragmentation, and incoherence of public service broadcasters have constantly delayed digital transformation, which additionally reflects the influence of the political structure on the development of the media sector.

The results of the qualitative analysis show that political and ethnic fragmentation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has a direct impact on several media segments: the functioning and sustainability of public service broadcasters, the implementation of media laws, the integration of the public service system, the slow development of digitalisation and modernization of the media sector.

Even with a formal legal framework and international support, the media system in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains weak and exposed to political influence. To improve it, it is important to strengthen cooperation among public broadcasters, secure stable funding and protect editorial independence.

In conclusion, the media system of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a mirror of the post-war social and political fragmentation. All future efforts to reform and modernize it must take into account the complexity of the political-administrative structure and its direct impact on the functioning and sustainability of the media in the country. Moving away from post-war narratives implies greater transparency, working in the public interest and aligning with EU regulations.

The study has some limitations, such as missing information on the announced reactions of public broadcaster employees, which were planned for the period after the conclusion of this analysis. However, combining document analysis with academic research and media reports

[34] Analiziraj.ba, 2025. "Ko čeka, dočeka: Počela digitalizacija televizijskog signala u BiH". *Analiziraj.ba*, 4 July 2025. Available at: https://analiziraj.ba/ko-ceka-doceka-pocela-digitalizacija-televizijskog-signala-u-bih/ [30 October 2025].

gives a solid base and useful insights into how political fragmentation affects the development and sustainability of media in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. The paper reveals the accuracy of earlier predictions, providing information about further discourse regarding the functioning of PSBs, digitalisation, and the socio-political context of post-war media development in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Zaključak

Analiza medijskog sistema u Bosni i Hercegovini pokazuje da politička decentralizacija i etno-politička fragmentacija, koje su se pojavile nakon agresije i oružanog sukoba 1992. - 1995., i potpisivanja Dejtonskog mirovnog sporazuma, snažno oblikuju način funkcionisanja medija. Poslijeratna struktura države, sa dva entiteta, Distriktom Brčko i deset kantona unutar Federacije BiH, stvorila je složen političko-administrativni sistem koji djeluje i na javne i privatne medije.

Rezultati kvalitativne analize pokazuju da politička i etnička fragmentacija u Bosni i Hercegovini ima posredan ili neposredan utjecaj na nekoliko segmenata: funkcioniranje i održivost javnih emitera, provedbu medijskih zakona, integraciju sistema javnog servisa, spor razvoj digitalizacije i modernizaciju medijskog sektora. Rad ne podrazumijeva političku i etničku fragmentaciju kao jedine uzroke navedenih problema, ali njihovu održivost posmatra u tom kontekstu

Čak i uz formalni pravni okvir i međunarodnu podršku, medijski sistem u Bosni i Hercegovini ostaje slab i izložen političkom utjecaju. Da bi se poboljšao, važno je ojačati saradnju među javnim emiterima, osigurati stabilno finansiranje i zaštititi uredničku nezavisnost. Svi budući napori za njegovu reformu i modernizaciju moraju uzeti u obzir složenost političko-administrativne strukture i njen posredan i neposredan utjecaj na funkcioniranje i održivost medija u zemlji.

Ovaj rad ima i neka ograničenja, kao što su nedostajuće informacije o najavljenim reakcijama zaposlenih u javnom emiteru, koje su bile planirane za period nakon završetka analize. Ipak, analiza u radu navedenih materijala daje solidnu osnovu i korisne uvide u društveno-političku fragmentaciju i održivost medija u poslijeratnoj Bosni i Hercegovini. Rad otkriva tačnost ranijih predviđanja, pružajući informacije o daljnjem diskursu u vezi s funkcionisanjem javnih emitera, digitalizacijom i društveno-političkim kontekstom poslijeratnog razvoja medija u Bosni i Hercegovini.

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